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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 000217

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TAGS: [KPOL](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: SENIOR CLERICS URGE KARZAI TO CRACK DOWN ON
PROSELYTIZING

REF: KABUL 0048

Classified By: DCM Chris W. Dell for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The High Ulema Council of Afghanistan met with President Karzai to express concern over proselytizing in Afghanistan and issued a public statement urging the government to crack down on missionary activity. The council has also asserted themselves regarding media content and standards. Religious conservatives may be using the run-up to the presidential and parliamentary elections to pressure politicians to demonstrate their Islamic credentials.

KARZAI URGED TO TAKE ACTION ON MISSIONARY ACTIVITY

¶2. (SBU) The High Ulema Council (also known as the High Council of Religious Scholars) is a independent group of influential Muslim scholars and mullahs from across the country representing the network of provincial ulema councils. It is a mix of Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. The Council meets regularly with President Karzai. It used its most recent meeting to highlight concern regarding missionary activity in Afghanistan. Council Deputy chairman Fazel Ahmad Manawi told us that delegates from Bamyan and Mazar-e-Sharif had reported missionary activities in those provinces. Member of Parliament and council member Maulawi Jebrailli told Poloff that missionary activities had been a long-standing concern of the Council, which had become increasingly frustrated by what they see as President Karzai's failure to address the issue.

¶3. (SBU) PRTs in Bamyan, Mazar-e-Sharif, and other provinces report there are no obvious proselytizing activities in these provinces. There are at least 16 faith-based service organizations currently working in Afghanistan, several of which are implementing partners with USAID and PRM. The generally young, modern and secular staff of these organizations vigorously defend the non-religious nature of their work, and the local office of the Christian Children's Fund has told PRM that they plan to change the name of their organization to Child Fund Afghanistan to avoid using the word "Christian" in their activities. There have been reports from Afghans (including our FSNs) of some instances of proselytizing. These include low-key sermons about

Christianity being offered as part of the English classes at a local institute.

¶4. (SBU) While proselytizing is not illegal under the Afghan constitution, it is discouraged as it could lead to conversion. Conversion from Islam, while not proscribed by the constitution, is a punishable offense under Shar'ia law. The individual is given an opportunity by the Shar'ia council to recant. If he refuses to do so, he can be stripped of all land and possessions, and his marriage is declared invalid. Jebraili added that the court could impose a death by hanging, but that the government would have the option of intervening and exiling the convert.

ISLAMIC VALUE ISSUES AND POLITICS

¶5. (SBU) Islamic values issues have also shaped an ongoing debate on media content and standards. The Ulemas, many of whom are also MPs, noted several instances of un-Islamic content on independent Tolo TV, and requested that Karzai take action, including making the Council responsible for broadcasting policy. Shortly after, Minister of Information and Culture Abdul Khoram informed private TV channels that programs "contrary to Afghanistan's culture and laws" would be banned. Officials from the National Directorate of Security reminded private TV station heads of the ban during a January 9 meeting. Saad Moseni, the head of Tolo, told Poloff that Indian soap operas and local pop culture shows were specifically mentioned as un-Islamic in the meetings. He reported he had agreed to stop airing Indian serials during the holy month of Muharram as a compromise with Khoram.

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¶6. (SBU) According to media reports, past president of Afghanistan and current Chair of the Council of the United Front, Burhuddin Rabbani, told a group of religious leaders that a number of Western countries were carrying out secret activities in the country to try to convert Afghans to Christianity. Rabbani accused unnamed (Western) groups of trying to convert locals and create disunity and discord among Muslims, which he said was "against the national interests of Afghanistan."

WHY NOW?

¶7. (C) The Ulema Council's assertiveness on the proselytizing issue and media issues, including the draft revised media law (Reftel) suggest that religious factions may take the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections as an opportunity to flex their muscles by pressing politicians to demonstrate their Islamic credentials, including by not appearing too subject to Western influence. Karzai's and Rabbani's activities suggest they recognize there might be a political penalty for taking on the conservatives in the Ulema council.

WOOD